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#fieldmemoirs (Continuing my series from journalism years; revisiting/updating a vignette first published for a limited audience)

May 2010 -- just a year before the catastrophic Syrian civil war would begin, resulting in one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Ancient Damascus, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, still exuded an air of peace and vibrancy. At the time, Assad's palace (pictured during my two-day trip there as a Reuters roving reporter, flanked by other international newswires colleagues), designed by renowned Japanese architect Kenzō Tange, was still a place of significance -- some fifteen years away from becoming suddenly empty of its occupant; another symbolic monument to yet another brutal dictator.

As Syrians marked the first anniversary of the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad and his iron-fisted rule, it stirred up some personal memories from pre-war Damascus, visualized here. This trip was the second leg of a broader regional tour that included Ankara and Algiers.

Then-President Dmitry Medvedev was paying the first state visit to Syria by a Russian leader since the Bolshevik Revolution. On the sidelines, the Russian energy minister Sergei Shmatko (who would die of COVID over a decade later) told me Moscow might help build a nuclear power plant in Syria: https://lnkd.in/gVUgh7jn. The International Atomic Energy Agency had been investigating Syria for two years over what it identified as a complex that resembled a nuclear reactor before it was bombed to rubble by Israeli warplanes in 2007. Damascus denied U.S. intelligence that the complex was a North Korean-designed reactor geared to making plutonium for atomic bombs.

Years later, Moscow intervened on Assad's side. In September 2015, I was covering Putin's meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama at UNGA - https://lnkd.in/etihappJ. (The Kremlin, trying to assert its dominance for domestic audiences, accused Washington of distorting events by claiming Putin had sought the meeting, insisting it was the U.S. that proposed talks - https://lnkd.in/ehFknycj.) Both agreed their armed forces should hold talks to avoid clashing in Syria; nevertheless, hours after Putin had left the U.S., Russia launched air strikes, in its biggest Middle East intervention in decades https://lnkd.in/ewHKegsi.

My colleague K., then a Reuters correspondent in Damascus, who showed me the ancient city during a few spare hours of that 36-hour trip, would soon be forced to flee the country. The Syrian government withdrew K.'s accreditation. Later on, as an émigré myself, I would encounter dozens of Syrian refugees from all walks of life, welcomed by Canada - lawyers, university professors, pharmacists, barbers, chefs - who fled the civil war and settled into their new lives in the True North.

Personal reflections from a former Reuters Kremlin correspondent.

Views are my own and do not represent the Government of Canada.

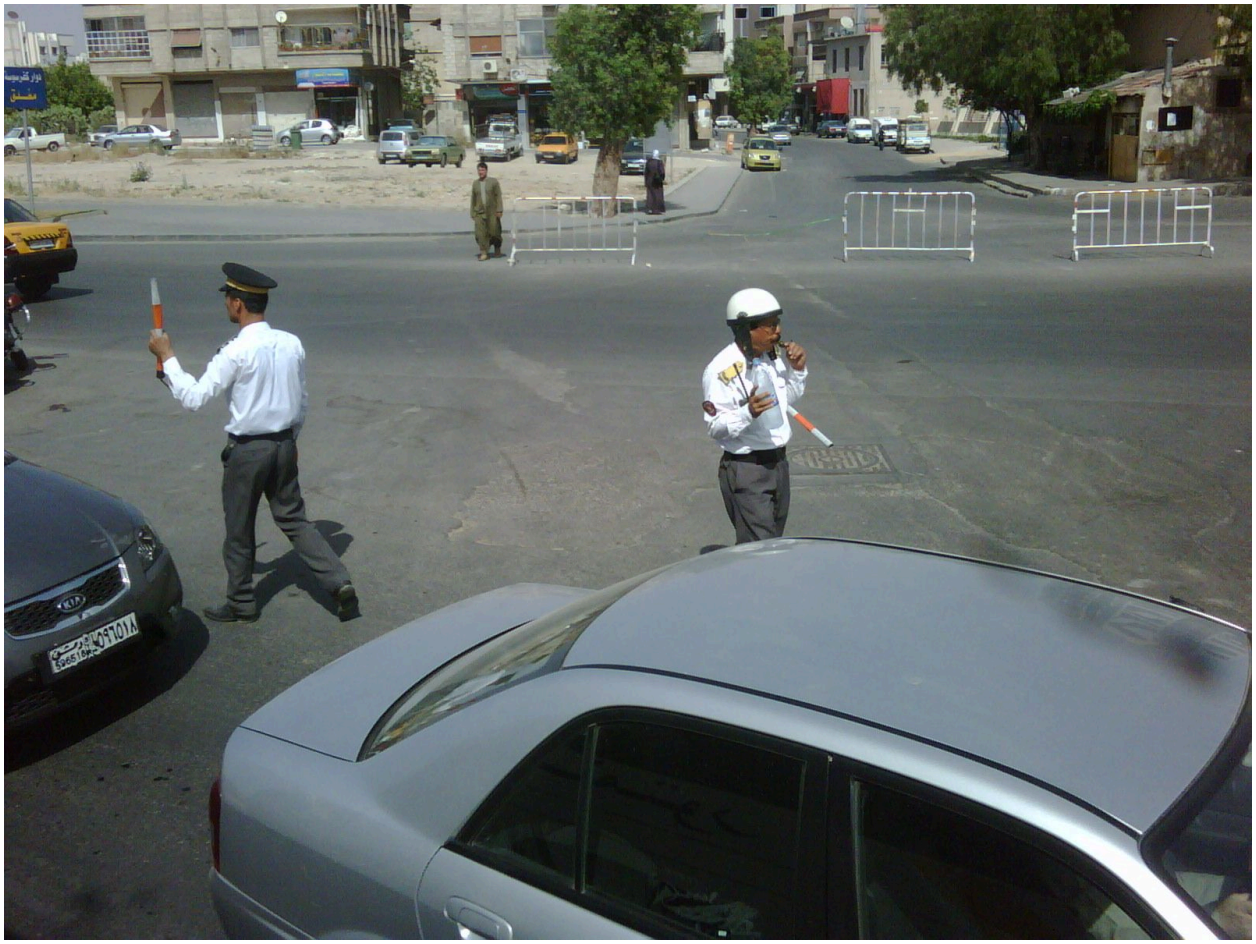
#Historical_Journalism

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
جامع السيد الرئيس حافظ الأسد

سورية بكل امتياز

لجنة المخابز الاحتياطية
لجنة المخابز الاحتياطية

JEANBOURGET



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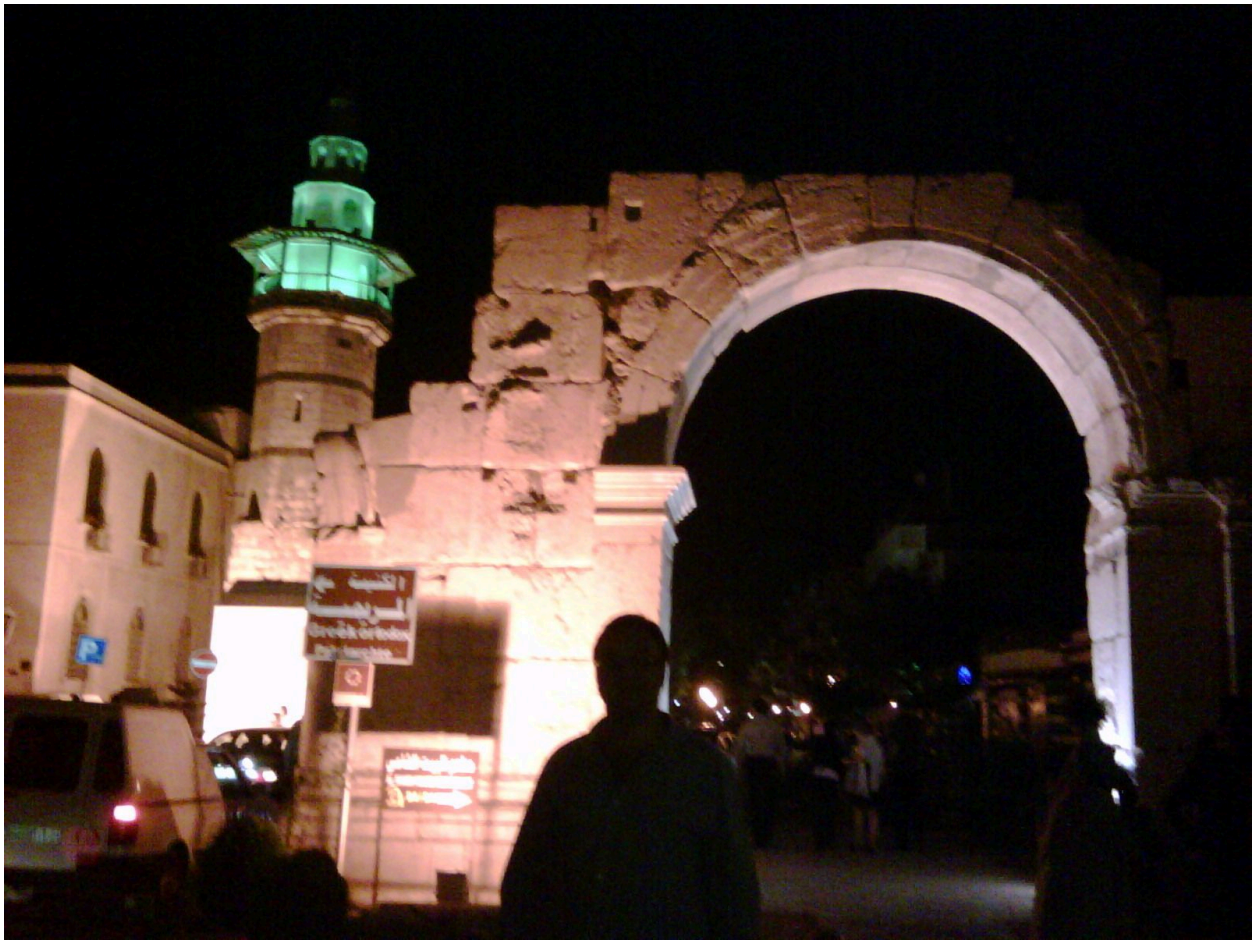

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